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THE EARLY DAYS OF VICTOR

By Lucy Reller and Ralph Lea

▲ *Victor Red & White Store, John Nies, proprietor, in front.*
Esther (Nies) Cox Photo

▲ *The John Nies family; Carrie, John, Esther and Heine Nies with 1926 Chevrolet touring car.* *Esther (Nies) Cox Photo*

Many German people who had gone to Russia and then migrated to the United States in the late 1800's settled in the Dakotas. They heard about a place in California that had good sandy soil that was suitable for vineyards and orchards and in 1897 they started coming to the Lodi area.

The east side of Lodi had been growing grain for over 40 years and land could be purchased for a reasonable price as wheat was not in great demand and the yields became less each year.

The German immigrants had large families and were well prepared to spend long days developing vineyards and orchards.

A highway and railroad extended from Lodi east to Valley Springs. The Green family bought 1/4 sections of federal land three to four miles from Lodi on the south side of the Mokelumne River. By 1870 the Green brothers, Jasper F., M.D. and father Jessie owned 460 acres surrounding the future town of Victor.

The Greens started selling 10 to 20 acre tracts at $35.00 to $70.00 an acre.

Albert Edgar Morden built one of the first houses in the area and was able to

▲ *Looking west across Bruella Road, depot, S.P. freight train, packing shed, blacksmith shop and Victor water tower.* *Irene Wasik Photo*

have the railroad build a freight depot close to his home. Morden named the railroad stop after his eldest son "Victor."

William J. Robinson purchased 25 acres from Jessie Green in 1900 and started a dairy ranch. Five years later Robinson sold to Peter Heil and moved to Lodi where he established a feed and fuel business on Pine Street. William Robinson's son Willard, moved the store to Lodi Avenue where his daughter still runs the business.

In 1902 Lyman Moore Lewis purchased 20 acres of the Green estate and built a house just west of Morden's home. His son George lived there until his grandson Charles married Beulah, granddaughter of Jacob Knoll, and moved into the home.

Peter Heil arrived in Victor with his wife and six children. He built a house and barn and they had five more children, including Ted, who later built sulphur machines. Peter Heil is said to have built the first fruit packing shed in Victor using the Safety First label.

In 1907 Jacob Knoll arrived on the scene and purchased land in the northeast part of town from early pioneer "Long Tom" Pope.

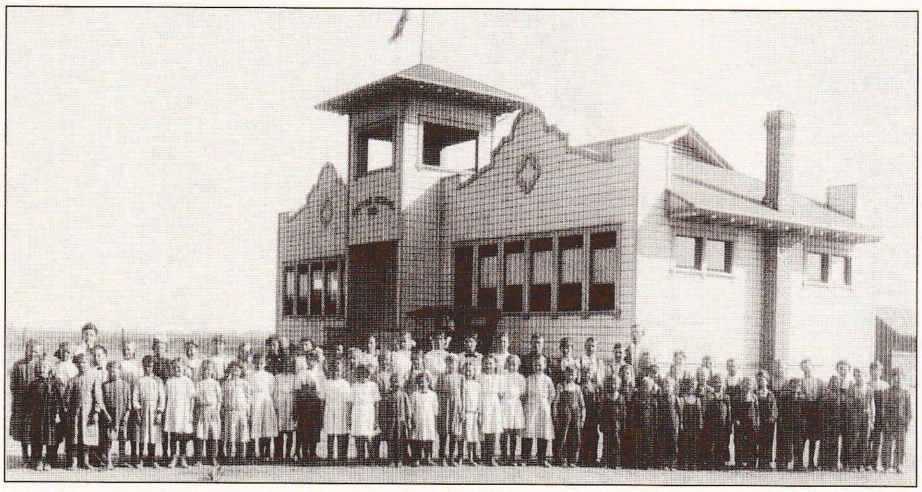
A year later the local grape growers built the Farmers Mutual Winery just east of Morden's property. R.F. (Frank) Green, President; Ludwig Reimche, Vice President and L.M. Lewis, Secretary. Similar to other early Lodi co-op wineries, the Victor establishment became the George West and Son property. After five years the Victor growers took back their winery and in 1923 they sold to Jacob Knoll.

Lot Lachenmaier and family came to Victor in 1910. He purchased five acres from Peter Heil and subdivided into lots. He built a large house and a store for general merchandise. His sons, Sam, Bill and John and sons-in-law delivered goods to rural families. Lot helped obtain the Victor school and served as the first clerk of the school board.

More large families were moving into the area and the children were forced to walk to Alpine school until Frank Green donated land and J.E. Fitzsimmons built the two room Victor school. The school opened on September 11, 1911 with 62 students, 31 boys and 31 girls. J.E. Condon, teacher and principal was paid $700.00 for 190 school days. George Lewis was in the first class and after eight years he was the only one to graduate. In the next ten years, one more classroom was added. By 1925 another classroom had been added and there were now four teachers, Ruth Declusion, Edith Burgstahler, Mrs. Stewart and Vera Garner.

In 1951 the San Joaquin County Supervisors merged the Victor and Alpine school districts. Ten years later the new district purchased the Bretheran Church located just west of the Victor school for $5,036.00. This was used for additional classroom space. In 1969 the Victor school was declared unsafe and it was ten years before the new $900,000 school opened in January just north of the Parkin Family Memorial Park and Baseball Diamond on Bruella Road.

The old Victor school on Highway 12 had Mrs. Ruth Declusion as Principal on duty for over 20 years starting in 1919. Discipline was the order of the day. If there was a serious problem at school, Mrs. Declusion visited the child's home and talked to the parents. The five foot tall principal was able to handle any situation at school and informed the children how to behave coming and going from school. They were taught to remove their head gear and stand still for any funeral procession on the way to Harmony Grove Cemetery. The daily flag salute was held outdoors when the weather permitted.



▲ *Victor School, 1911, two rooms and eight grades.*

The Victor Store-Red and White

The Henry Nies family was in the Victor area since 1903. John, the eldest stayed in business in Lehr, North Dakota.

Jacob and Christ Nies both married daughters of Lot Lachenmaier and became involved in the first store in Victor. After 1920 Edward and Adolph Nies started another General Merchandise store at the northeast corner of Bruella Road and Second Street. The 150 foot lot had a full basement, the store was on the first floor and a hotel was built on the top floor. All of this on Perrin's Miracle Blocks dated 1921.

Edward Nies worked in the store but his brothers Adolph and Jacob were starting the Victor Fruit Company. Another relative, Fred Frey, became owner of the building.

Because of illness, brother John Nies and family moved from Lehr, North Dakota to Victor in November, 1924 and purchased the business and lived above the store. It was called The John Nies Grocery and it also carried clothing and hardware. Daughter Esther remembers customers and neighbors sitting in front of the building during the day and early evening hours.

In May, 1931, John became quite ill and sold the store back to his bothers. Ed decided to move across the Mokelumne to the Christian Colony and farm. Adolph Nies sold Ed's half of the business to his father-in-law, Daniel Schaeffer who became a partner that operated the store. A year later, Daniel was unable to continue so he engaged his younger son, Ben, to run the business. Living just west of the store in the old Lachenmaier home was the John Geigle family. The eldest daughter of the seven children, Rose, didn't go unnoticed by young Ben Schaeffer and in 1934 they were married.For the next 14 years the store was known as the Schaeffer and Nies Red and White Store.

During the 1930's and 1940's there were bands or small groups of gypsies living off the land and moving through the country side. The women and sometimes young children would descend on the store when there was only one person on duty. They would tell fortunes to customers and attempt to lure the clerk away from the cash register. Rose Schaeffer remembers that she would lock up the store if she saw the gypsies coming.

▲ *Victor circa 1921. Bruella Road looking north, Ulmer's Store on left and Northern Fruit Company on right.* *San Joaquin Historical Society Photo*

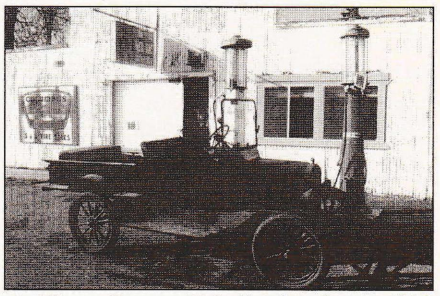
Ben started a bar in the basement which was known as the "Hole." In August of 1946 the Schaeffer's sold to Ben's sisters, Tillie Saunders and Esther Shults and their husbands. A year later they sold the store to Elmer Market and Walter Saylor.

The "Red and White" store began to fall on hard times and soon Elmer was operating the store alone. Competition came when Adam Preszler built the United Market that was operated by the ill-fated Parkin family and Herb Preszler built the Victor Hardware on Victor Road.

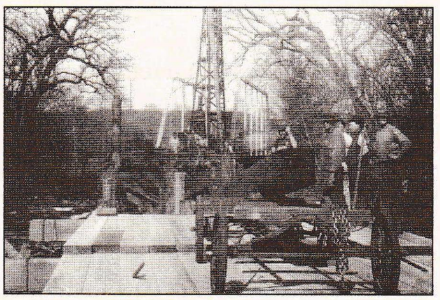
John F. Schlotthauer and family came to California and settled in Victor on December 28, 1923 and purchased the blacksmith shop and house of Johnathan Schmidt. Schmidt had built the shop in 1920 and it burned down two years later. He then built a house with the burned lumber and rebuilt the blacksmith shop.

John F. Schlotthauer and son Jake started a garage in the shop and in 1927 went into partnership with Ted Heil to build sulphur dusting machines with used Model T Fords. Mildew

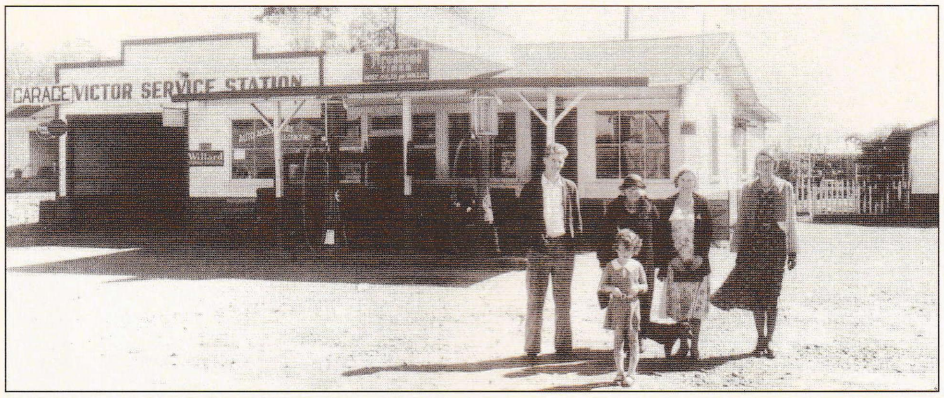
▲ *Victor Lachenmaier Store, built in 1910 by Lott Lachenmaier, ran by his sons and son-in-laws. (l-r) Jacob Nies, John Lachenmaier, Sam Lachenmaier and Dan Wendland.* *Lorene Hoffman Photo*



▲ *Victor Garage. Rebuilt after fire in 1922 and purchased two years later by John F. Schlotthauer. Operated by sons, Jake, George and Johnnie for almost fifty years.* *Johnnie Schlotthauer Photo*



▲ *Victor Bridge 1929. Building the Victor Bridge over the Mokelumne River by J.E. Fitzsimmons.* *Bob Fitzsimmons Photo*



▲ *Victor Service Station. Eddie Ulmer, Phylis Ulmer, Mrs. Mordon, Alice Ulmer and Vi Bender.*
Viola Bender Photo

▲ *Evangelical Church, Victor, California. Dedication July 16, 1910. Martha (Nies) Lea, far left.*

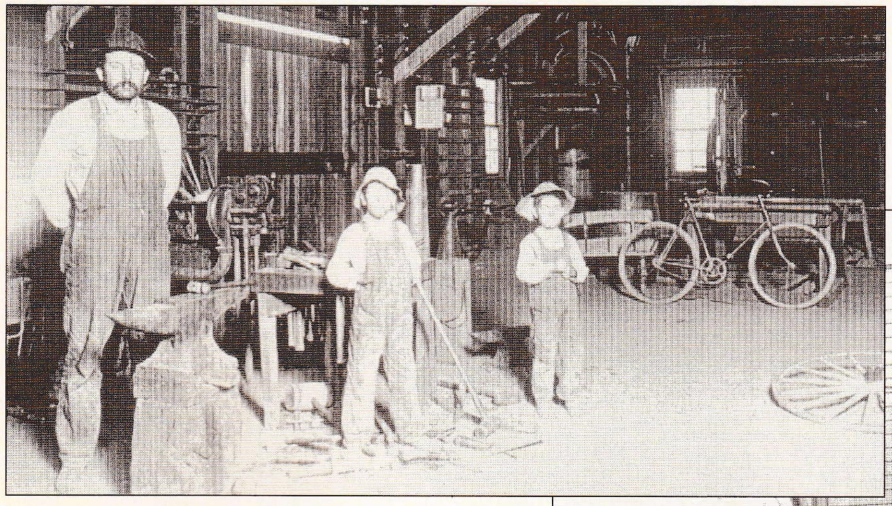
was a big problem in the growing of grapes and hand sulphuring was a difficult job and not too effective. They were building these machines in a barn behind the Peter Heil house when the barn burned. A year later the partnership was dissolved. Heil obtained machinist Walt Turner and his brother and they started a factory next to the Ulmer store where hundreds of sulphur machines were built and shipped to vineyards in the southern part of Central California.

The Schlotthauer's continued their garage and in 1930 started building the "Victor Duster" machines. They bought new stripped down Ford Model A's from Krieger's in Lodi, Jim Pinkerton made the blowers. Most of the 350 dusters built by Schlotthauers' were sold and serviced locally. Sons Johnnie and George became partners with brother Jake when the father retired and obtained an automobile dealership for Dodge and Plymouth in 1934.

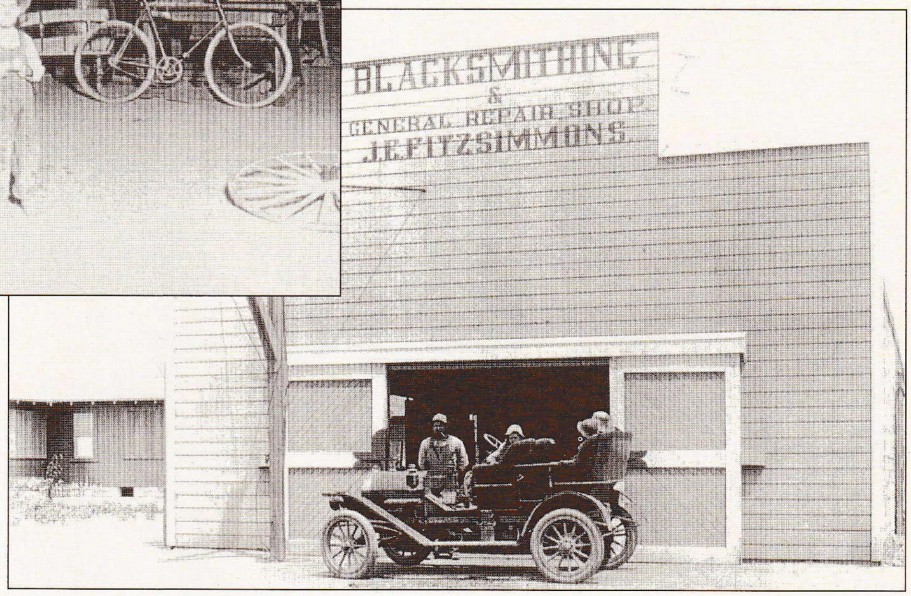
Victor Service Station

In 1925, Sam Schenkenberger started the Victor Service Station on Morden property, the south side of the Lodi-Lockeford Road at the Bruella Road intersection. He had chairs and a bench out front for customers and one chair was wired for shock for any stranger who happened to sit there.

▶ *Victor circa 1926. Back row, l-r: Annie (Kludt) Schlotthauer, Christina Geigle, Lydia (Filhardt) Schlotthauer, Esther (Cox) Nies, Johnnie Schlotthauer, Albert Miller and Leo Geigle. Front row: George Schlotthauer and Miller boy.*
Esther Cox Photo



◄ *"Victor" blacksmith J.E. Fitzsimmons, son Ernest and son Dave.*
San Joaquin Historical Society Photo



▲ *Victor, early 1900; Fitzsimmons house and shop* *San Joaquin Historical Society Photo*

Sam lost money for five years before moving to Napa. The Morden's who owned the property ran the station with son Manny operating the business after marrying Violet (Vi) Ulmer. When Manny passed away at a young age, the station was left to Eddie Ulmer who had married Alice Morden.

Eddie was so well liked that farmers and townspeople used the station as a social hang out. Ulmer would sell gasoline, sandwiches, milk shakes, hand packed ice cream and the Sunday paper. Victor lost one of its finest citizens in the early 1950's when Eddie Ulmer became poisoned from using carbon tetrachloride as a cleaning solvent for automobile and truck engines.

Most of the old timers today remember that in the early days, Percy Morden, son of Albert, operated a candy store that sold ice cream. Just west of Percy's on Bruella was Red Mastel's Blacksmith shop. In 1940 he moved the blacksmith shop east on Second Street.

The Daniel Hensel family, three boys and six girls came to Victor in 1920. Dan started a leather shop inside Ulmer's store but later moved it to his home on Second Street.

Karl Ulmer operated a General store in Lodi until 1917 when he purchased the Lachenmaier store from Jacob and Christ Nies and moved his family, wife Magdalena, sons Julius, Eddie and Hilmuth and daughters Viola and Hilda to Victor.

Karl became the first Postmaster when the Victor Post Office opened August 16, 1922. Son Julius operated the store after his parents retired and he became the second Postmaster in 1934. Metha Zimmerman was Postmaster 1944 to 1946 and Gertrude Eikenberry from 1946 to 1968 when Stanley Hamblin took over. Next Clete Grenz became Postmaster and Peggy Shore is the current Postmaster.

The Salem Evangelical Church

The church was started in the John Bittner house on Alpine Road in 1903. Seven years later a church was built in Victor on land donated by Jacob Knoll. The all German language services were attended by most of the residents of the area until their own church denominations were built. In 1922 Salem built a new church at Elm and Central Streets in Lodi and the Victor church was converted into a house.

When the all-day Sunday services were held in Victor, the members who drove horses built their own corrals to feed and water their animals for the extended stay.

What did residents of Victor do for entertainment? In 1931 a small circus came to Victor and erected a tent on a vacant lot just north of the Red and White Store. They had animals in cages and acrobats. It was the first time most children in town had ever seen cotton candy and waited with excitement for their first taste of the delectable sweetness.

In the summer of the mid 1930's old time medicine shows set up just south of Ulmer's. People came for the music and show in the evening before darkness set in. Some adults bought the bottles of Health (alcohol) Tonic.

Alvina Geigle remembers the young people would take the wrappings from a new tire and cover an old tire to look like new. They went out on Victor Road, tied a rope around their bait and placed it alongside of the roadway. If a car stopped, the kids would pull the tire into the vineyard and run.

◄ *1930 Victor Ford Duster; self-propelled and later a one-man operation.*

Ted Heil and Schlotthauer Brothers, both manufacturers.
Bank of Stockton Photo

▲ *Victor circa 1922. Northern Fruit Company; Ed Preszler, president (with vest), shed workers and grape packers.* *Vi Bender Photo*

Packing Sheds

Nine packing sheds were located on both sides of Bruella Road on the north side of the Lodi-Valley Springs railroad tracks. Peter Heil built the first building about 1910 and was followed by Peter Joens, Frank H. Buck, J.J. Schmiedt, John Weigum and Sons, Victor Fruit Co., The Big Four Co., P.J. Goehring, Jacob Knoll, Pacific Fruit Exchange, Northern Fruit Co., Albert Nies with Dumont, Valley Fruit and King Victor. The Victor Fruit Co. added the Weigum shed, Albert Nies obtained the "Old Vine" shed (formerly Bucks) and King Victor was a new shed.

In 1920, The Victor Fruit Growers was started by brothers Jacob and Adolph Nies and their relatives that were members of the Salem Evangelical Church.

The Big Four Co. was started by Charles Beckman, Gust Frey, John Weiderich and Dave Weigum.

The Heil shed was used by

Weigum before The Big Four was formed and moved into the Frank H. Buck shed. Later, Albert Nies left Victor Fruit Co. and started Valley Fruit Distributors. One of the last shipping companies formed was King Victor started by Al Joens and Dan Miller.

The P.J. Goehring shed was used as a roller skating rink and basketball court in the off season. The packing sheds were used for wedding receptions, school graduations and other social events.

▲ *Unloading field boxes of Tokay grapes in 1922 at the Northern Shed in Victor. r-l: Owners and name of trucks; Emanual Handels's Selden, H.G. Mettler and twelve year old son, Rich, in their Republic, Gottlieb Mettler's Republic, Adam Mettler's Republic, William Preszler's Transport and D.D. (Dan) Mettler's Federal Sol.D. tire truck.* *Rich G. Metter Photo*

Victor Fruit Growers

In 1920 the Nies brothers and their relatives and friends who attended the Evangelical Church started shipping and packing grapes, plums and cherries at the western-most shed in Victor.

They incorporated a few years later with Jacob Nies, President; Adolph Nies, Secretary and Chris Nies, Treasurer. Their cousin Jacob Schmierer and Gottlieb Motz completed the Board of Directors.

Northern Fruit Company

The group was shipping and packing grapes at the Amphere Station on the traction line.

In 1921 ten men, all related, moved to Victor and purchased a shed from Earl May. It was located just east of Bruella Road. Each invested $1500.00 and elected Ed Preszler their president. The other investors were Ed's two brothers, Bill and Henry and his father George. There were three Mettler brothers, Henry G., Gotlieb, Adam and cousin Dan Mettler, plus Emanuel Handel and Fred Kirschenman. Pepper Fruit Co. handled their sales.

In the beginning, the Northern Fruit Co. was made up of members and relatives of the Reform Church.

The Victor rabbit drives were a big yearly event. The numerous rabbits ran wild and raised havoc in the vineyards and kept young vines from growing. Hunters with shotguns were loaded into farmers' trucks. Half were driven east and half were driven west then forming two lines, advanced toward each other. A free lunch was served in the Northern Fruit shed or another shed by the Victor Home Department Women. In the early days, rabbits were left at the place where they were shot. Later, beginning in the 1950's, the carcasses were picked up and sold.

Just south of the Victor School playground was a baseball diamond where the Victor Tops and Victor Strings played their home baseball games. Some of the players were George, Bob and Dub Weigum, Rich and Emil Mettler, Al Preszler and H. Geigle. In 1934 the Eastside Winery was built on the traction line and the Victor ball players became members of their team.

Ice Houses

In the late 1940's it became very important to have the grapes cooled properly before shipping them out of state. The Victor Fruit Co. built a large ice house that would also store fruit. The Northern Fruit Co. built a large plant that made its own cool air.

Victor Farm Bureau Basketball Team, 1927. ▲
Top row, l-r: Bob (Rob) Weigum, Sam Schenkenberger, Ed Preszler, Al Joens. Bottom row, l-r: Tobias (Dub) Weigum, Eugene Heil, Harry Mall, Julius Ulmer, and one unknown.

▲ *Waiting to start Victor Rabbit Drive on Bruella Road in the 1940's. Ulmer's Store on left. Far right, Tony Wasik, center, John Frey, Albert Nies, Riney Bechthold and Turner Hardware selling ammunition.*

▼ *After the hunt, January 18, 1935. Chairman Martha Handel notes that the weather was raining and cold. Fifty pounds of beans and over 600 hot dogs prepared for lunch by the Victor Farm Home Department for hungry rabbit hunters in Victor.* *Irene Wasik photo*

Albert Nies built a similar ice house.

Shipping cherries and brining them are still in demand. The Tokay grape, packing and shipping has come to a halt.

The packing sheds of P.J. Goehring, J.J. Schmiedt and the Pacific Fruit Exchange were all leveled by a wind storm in the late 1930's. The Knoll shed fell into non-use and burned. Victor Fruit Co. is now owned by Dole Fruit Co. and Northern Fruit Co. is leased to the Landmark Co. Valley Fruit shed is used for storage. The Victor Winery is now a salvage yard. The Red and White Store is replaced by a mobile home, Victor Garage is closed. Ulmer's, which became the Know Place is now Dirty Dicks. The once predominately German community now has a large American-Spanish mixture. The Lodi-Valley Springs railroad is no longer used, Victor Service Station was a nursery for a while and today is a used car lot.

In the 1930's, the Knoll Winery in Victor was managed by Walter Green, husband of the first grade school teacher. Walter Pankow was the winemaker. August Knoll and sister Bertha Kammerer ran the operation until the winery closed in 1959.

The Victor Fruit Growers was managed by Riney Bechthold and then by Arthur Hoffman until it was sold.

The Northern Fruit Co. was under the direction of Art Mettler until Rich G. Mettler moved up to Secretary-Manager.

In 1950 the Goehring Meat Company (Victor Brand) was established just west of the Victor School. After five years it moved to larger quarters on Cherokee Lane in Lodi.

▲ *Valley Fruit Shed fire in 1953. Charlie Mettler, fireman on left.* *Irene Wasik photo*

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